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An Interview with Marvin Bell

Marvin Bell

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AN INTERVIEW WITH MARVIN BELL

When *The Iowa Review* got under way in 1970, Marvin Bell was its first poetry editor. Eleven years later, we conducted a comprehensive interview with him (12/1, 1981). Marvin, of course, has remained a colleague and friend; for years his students have been key members of our staff, and occasionally, with tact I think and all due hesitation, we have sampled his poems in our pages. So now, after nearly another twenty years, I thought it would be valuable and enjoyable to interview him once more. Marvin was graciously willing, and we set out on tape in the traditional way. Somehow, though, email became our medium, and that is the means by which we conducted this conversation throughout the early months of this year. Much of this time, Marvin was on the road, on a long, winding journey to Long Island, Florida, Tennessee, and New Mexico before arriving in Washington. He and his wife Dorothy have a home in Port Townsend to which they return most summers. Email, as will surprise few any more, kept us in touch all the way.

This fall *Nightworks, Poems 1962-2000*, will appear from Copper Canyon Press. Beginning with a series of twenty-one new poems, "Sounds of the Resurrected Dead Man's Footsteps," this publication culminates and continues a rich sequence of work of the nineties. The Dead Man first appeared in *Iris of Creation* (1990), then again in *A Marvin Bell Reader* (1994). *The Book of the Dead Man* (1994) followed and soon a second Dead Man volume, *Ardor* (1997), both from Copper Canyon. The Resurrected Dead Man sounded his footsteps first in *Wednesday* (1997) from Salmon Publishing, in Clare County, Ireland. So the project grows. The Dead Man is a voice, a way of being, the character of Marvin's poetry enacted. He is an archetypal figure with sacramental dimensions. He is equally understated, a creature of the corner of your eye muttering about wristwatches, mufflers, and cardboard boxes.

With something to say about almost everything, he is a listener to the sermon and a sermon-maker too, a vernacular philosopher who follows every funeral he meets, the gentleman who stopped for Emily and who waits for each of us, as for Marvin, who explores the way ahead in the Dead Man's nightly company, learning to live "as if already dead."

We trust that the way will continue long and winding, for Marvin still has much to do among us, one sign of which is that in the midst of our conversation, in early March of this year, he was named the first Poet Laureate of the State of Iowa. He and the Dead Man, for they are now inseparable.

DH: Marvin, your poetry often reminds me of Montaigne on essays.

“It is a thorny undertaking, and more so than it seems, to follow a movement so wandering as that of our minds. . . . I go out of my way, but rather by license than carelessness. My ideas follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance. . . . My style and my mind alike go roaming.” (Trans. Donald M. Frame)

Doesn't that sound familiar to your way of writing?

MB: God bless Montaigne. It's fundamental to acknowledge that writing is a design of the mind. My poems seem clear to me, sometimes painfully so. They seem to me utterly clear even when others find them cryptic. I have to acknowledge that I sometimes employ what may look like a kaleidoscope of associations. Still, a kaleidoscope has a design. The necessary distinction is between complication and complexity. I hope by following an impassioned mind to embody the latter. And I lean toward those flights of fancy that ascend from the ground up. For me, things connect.

DH: Complication and complexity. Is that a vital distinction?

MB: I probably shouldn't have put it quite that way, since the Dead Man of the Dead Man poems erases distinctions. I think of complexity as the fabric of life and the character of emotion. Complexity requires a fusion of many elements, some of them seemingly disparate, even contradictory. “Complex,” as a wine is said to be. We feel complexity in language as depth. Complication is a cheap imitation of complexity in which the elements do not fuse. One can create it in poetry with disjunctions, ellipses, fragments, contortions, nonsense. . . . And speed. A smart poet can move like a water strider scurrying over the surface. There are lots of ways to look and sound complicated. They are not uninteresting, but they have a short shelf life.

DH: I like that, complexity as “the character of emotion.” Not much emotion without at least two, is there? Ideas, strands, motifs as at the beginning of *Nightworks*, your new *Selected*, with “Sounds of the Resurrected Dead Man's Footsteps (#1).”

1. BABY HAMLET

Be that as it may, it may be that it is as it will be. . .

What a first line. It sounds like circumlocution but isn't. It's an expression of fate, however conditional, not to mention a play on the most famous line in

the language. What's "baby" about your Hamlet?

MB: "Baby" as in the beginning. "Baby" as in innocent. "Baby" as in the baby of the family. "Baby" as in helpless to do otherwise.

DH: So:

Be that as it may, it may be that it is as it will be.
His word a sword without a hiss.
Cruelly, the son obliged to sacrifice himself to a feud.
On the Feast of the Angel of Consumption and Death.
We move through time beset by indecision.
Thus, events occur while waiting for the news.
Or stuck in moral neutral.
The Nazis willing to let aid enter the Camps if those bringing it
swore not to help the prisoners escape.
The hopeless pacifism of those who promised.
The Platonic ideal carried to its logical inconclusion.
The heroes those who lied to the Third Reich.
Otherwise, the world stands caught between Hamlet
and Ophelia.
Ophelia's dress a dead ringer for beauty.

That motionless sword is as firm, exact, and centered as the first line seems not to be. Hamlet, the Jew of Denmark.

MB: Ah, you're referring to the second poem in *Nightworks*, in which I refer to Hamlet as "the Jew of Denmark before Shakespeare seduced him." Hamlet is beset, fated by knowledge, set apart. Bound to the history of his family. He is like a Jew who doesn't know he is Jewish but is caught up in events aimed at him. Aimed at him because of what he is, not what he has done. It's enough to drive a fellow crazy. It doesn't seem a stretch to me to parallel Hamlet's indecision with the world's reluctance to act early and decisively against the Nazis. Of course, he is also the victim, and he will be, also, at the end, most decisive.

DH: But first, his inaction, ours, the beautiful dress a synecdoche not only for what we failed to do but for our aestheticising of civilization's failure?

MB: Oh yes. Indeed. Art has the wherewithal to turn life-and-death into a matter of aesthetics. Events look different when viewed from a distance.

DH: You see, I can't resist trying to straighten out your poems, bring those sidelong glances into more straightforward relation.

MB: “Sidelong” is a good word for how I spot relations. What seems peripheral is only peripheral until one turns one’s head. So I turn my head.

DH: Over time, your “kaleidoscope” assembles familiar pieces. But it’s not just a matter of sliding around among the chips, is it? When do you feel, or what signs do you recognize that you tilt toward a poem rather than toward versified talk, for example?

MB: Well, I trust intensity, for one thing. I become intensely focused when writing. The language grabs at me. The sounds and rhythms impart their own necessity. And the syntax. In poetry, syntax is destiny. Writing, I enter a maelstrom of syntactical possibility. I am physically transported by that energy. My method consists of a series of mental explosions. An expanding universe of possibilities until I say “enough.” As for what sort of chips are useful in the kaleidoscope—almost any should be. It’s not the material at hand but the quality of attention given it.

DH: Do you have to prepare yourself, do something ritualistic, like “Shakespeare” in the recent movie? Mark off writing time from that which is less intensely focused?

MB: I don’t plan writing time because I can’t know beforehand if I will have the energy. Not just energy, but the kind of vigor that taps into more circuitry than I use in daily matters. I suppose you could say I get hot. And I don’t write until the pot boils over. Of course I have learned how to turn up the heat. One thing is simply to stay up late. It’s metabolic.

Dead Man poems seem able to include anything, but that makes the choices more telling. The connections are, first of all, physical. The parts go together in the tangible world. Then, narrative. They tell a story or follow an argument. I try to discern why certain elements have entered my consciousness in relation to other elements of the poem and then—if you don’t mind my switching metaphors—write the lines that will sew the whole together. But the sewing, I admit, uses unusual stitches. Briefly put, I would like everything in each of my poems to be used up by the end. I wouldn’t say I look for what the critics call “closure.” It’s more urgent than that. I want to find the end. And there at the end, if I have been alert enough and lucky, whatever was associational will have been embedded in a rational matrix.

DH: But now also in a larger, more comprehensive matrix. I’m thinking back to our earlier interview and your insistence, nearly twenty years ago, that the long poem wasn’t for you. Not that one can’t change one’s mind. The Dead Man finally gave you access to epic length without epic continuity. We could think of it, I say “it” now, as an epic by cantos.

MB: I'm not cut out metabolically to write the conventional long poem. I'm partial to the poem that keeps all its balls in the air until it's time to catch them. A long poem can't do that. It has to break into prose. It may be metered prose, but its character is still that of prose. And a poem can take only so much prose. Long narrative poems have their virtues, of course, especially when it rains.

DH: Was "Initial Conditions" a point of transition? That too is in *Iris of Creation*, in which your first Dead Man poem appears. It begins with a nod to the instant of lyric transport and Dickinson, "The way the sun will slant." But it extends itself differently from anything of yours than I can think of. Twenty eighteen-line stanzas, each one full stopped. It's stately and intimate, a beautiful meditation on writing, on living through and in one's dying, with hints of Whitman, speaking of length to come. Something in it reminds me of his saying death may be different from what we think, and "luckier."

MB: You were alert to catch a glimpse of Dickinson and Whitman. "Initial Conditions" does seem like a precursor to a book-length effort, doesn't it. Interestingly, I wrote it during a spring and summer in Port Townsend, and I wrote the first Dead Man poem there one winter. I assumed for years that "Initial Conditions" came first, but when I checked back I discovered that the first Dead Man poem was begun by the fall of 1988. I don't have a first date on the poem but the second, the date when I decided to work with it, is Nov. 18, 1988. I see now what took place. I wrote one Dead Man poem. I had no intention of writing another one. I put it out of my mind. Six months later, I started "Initial Conditions," which I wrote May to August of 1989. The Dead Man wasn't resurrected until February of 1992 when I started a second Dead Man poem, there again intending only to write one more. Well, Socrates says that the task of philosophy is to teach us how to die. As for "Initial Conditions," I get goosebumps when anyone says they like it.

DH: It's a favorite of mine. I find it has the wisdom one hopes for from a Dead Man though without his appearance. It's large enough that every reading brings new lines forward, so it's hard to "use up" as you said, a few moments ago. It may not "have room for everything," but it radiates a sense of largeness which the Dead Man has taken over.

MB: With the Dead Man I try for both ways: use it up but don't let it end. The two sections of a Dead Man poem may be as far as one can go in the midst of a large theme and still hope to keep all the balls in the air. I want nothing left hanging, emotionally or logically. It's the old idea that a poem can be as woven as a spider's web: touch any part of it, the whole thing trembles.

DH: As in “Baby Hamlet”? or it in conjunction with the second part of that poem, “The Play Within the Play”?

Hamlet a man asked to die now.
Madness to try to make sense of a father’s ghost.
To know one lives yet may not.
To imbibe a poison over time—wishing to be, yet consigned.
And the work details, the meager rations, the Motherland.
Destined to clog the machinery of the State with one’s body,
Nazi the masters of whitewash.
Fairly dust rising from lime shoveled into the grave.
Poems and postmortems a struggle with Danish collaboration.
Hamlet a play of ones foreshadowing a time of millions.
Hamlet addressing a skull the poet speaking to the dead.
Bones the bloodless gray of ancient manuscripts.
The eyes marbles clicking in their pockets.
Hamlet done to death with his head in his hands.

“Wishing to be, yet consigned.” There’s our famous line again. More directly mirrored this time, and fated. I didn’t know Hamlet was such a favorite of yours. You should teach my course this summer.

MB: One of our critics—was it Harry Levin?—conjectured that Hamlet got away from Shakespeare.

DH: As the best always will. And that first line again, chillingly fatal. “Asked to die,” as if he were given a choice. The executioner comes and says, “would you please roll up your sleeve so I may insert the needle?”

MB: Yes, it’s the human condition in-your-face: die now. And not randomly either, but definitely and for precise circumstances. No sense of accident but of the will brought irrevocably to bear in the only way in which human will can act irrevocably.

DH: Here’s a line that sticks with me, a line I find particularly beautiful. It’s from “Skulls,” the second poem in the “Resurrected Dead Man’s Footsteps” series of *Nightworks*. “Today, one can stroll in the footsteps of those who walked single file from this life.” It’s less beautiful than powerful or moving. Did you have a sense of ratcheting things up a notch there, of taking a step unlike any yet in the lines that came before it?

MB: It’s there that the poem moves, suddenly, from the past to the present, and it lugs the weight of the past with it. Is that what you mean by “ratcheting

things up a notch,” the Holocaust victims walking to the gas chambers? Today, anyone can visit the death camps. But a Jew cannot escape the feeling of having already been there. He cannot evade the foreboding feeling that it could and might happen again and a lingering sense that the Nazi-executed holocaust, with its calculated intention and heartless accounting, cannot be resolved. Its implications for the soul and the human condition will not let us off. We have to fight nostalgia. They marched and were herded. We stroll.

DH: Yes, we stroll, unherded, but we all step off one by one. I don’t want to erase the past by saying that, and I certainly don’t want to convert it to nostalgia. But it is as if the line, in its extension, steps through historical boundaries into something broader, less catastrophic but infinitely sad.

MB: It does seem sad, doesn’t it. And perhaps the more so for being pastoral. The camps were located in the countryside, after all. And there is the unbridgeable distance between the victims and us. Try to walk in their footsteps. It has practically destroyed some who tried to know what they knew. The distance between us, anywhere at any time, creates a feeling of depth in human relationships. One can never cross it completely.

DH: Let me go back to Shakespeare. These Resurrected poems, or “cantos,” are beginning to seem like sonnets. Always a pair of them and the pairs more balanced now. In *The Book of the Dead Man* and *Ardor* that wasn’t so. I counted lines. In this new selection, eighty percent of the poems have the same number of lines in parts 1 and 2. Seventeen out of twenty-one. In the first two books fewer than twenty percent did. Were you aware of that?

MB: Yes, I have been aware of it. In *The Book of the Dead Man* and in *Ardor* I wanted to be sure to fill in the area, to cover the whole field, if you will. Whereas in the Resurrected poems, it’s as if I put down a path of stones. You may have to twist and turn, jump, or at least hop, but it’s a definite path. A Dead Man poem is a field. You can cross it in many directions. You can jump in and out of it. A Resurrected Dead Man poem is a path. I go first. If you want to follow me, you have to stay on the path.

DH: Four of those seventeen have parts of fourteen lines each and another four of either thirteen or fifteen. You see why I said sonnet?

MB: Yes, I do. The sonnet suggests precise organization in a limited space. If you don’t need to tell a story, or act out a drama, the sonnet or a double sonnet is usually long enough. A poem of that length doesn’t need to stop and start in order to twist and turn. Of course, Dead Man poems, where the sentence is the line, also stop and start with every line, which plays against the easy fluidity of a short lyric.

DH: The lines now are shorter, more terse too. None of those galloping spillovers running down three or four indented lines as in the first two collections. Not a single one. So it feels more urgent, more like cutting to the chase.

MB: That too. In the Dead Man books, I had my cake and ate it too. I wrote in lines and, by means of very long lines, in paragraphs at the same time. Those books are the earlier chapters of a train of thought. The Resurrected Dead Man poems arrive, if you will, much later in the train. I'm tempted to venture that sometimes, the more one knows, the less one has to say.

DH: And so comes silence. But back to "used up." In either one of a set or in the pair? Can you point to a line in which you were conscious as you wrote it, or at least as you approved of it and let it stand, that you were "using up" an element of that poem? "The eyes marbles clicking in their pockets," for example; is that using something up or having something left over?

MB: I think of that line as filling in a gap. Though it wasn't written to fill in a gap. But there would be one without it.

DH: Another question about your current form. I keep saying "lines." You sometimes say "sentence"; the line is the sentence. Which means, among other things, that you eschew the most ooed and ahed over aesthetic maneuver of our time, The Line Break, with all its heavy breathing. How did you evolve in that direction?

MB: Well, the sentence is the secret to poetry. Syntax provides all the opportunities for enjambments and caesurae and end stops. Syntax determines tone of voice, variations in pitch, pace and timbre, tension and grace. Free verse hungers for charged syntax. But as competent free verse has become the style of the age, it has become slacker. Lost its charge. The line has been bled of its power. So it occurred to me to stack sentences. The sentence would stand as itself but also be elastic and capable of lyrical variation. It would permit a more fluid assimilation of prose elements in poetry. I came to that after thirty years of shaping forms of free verse, three decades of line disease.

DH: Which takes us back to what you said in the beginning, that it's fundamental to understand writing as a design of the mind. The poem's authority doesn't come from its mirror held up to nature but . . .

MB: Uh oh. Can I get away here with saying that the mind is also nature? Can I strengthen my assertion by pointing out that, thanks to metaphor, the mind's designs are recognizably those of nature? Still, the fact that language refers to things outside itself is inescapable. Some critics find it a drag. Poets generally find it a benefit. Well, there are also poets who find it a drag and

either try to undercut the referential character of words or constantly point to it. Reading their poems is like having sex with a car.

DH: I'll stick with sonnets. Not that these are sonnets, but they flirt with being sonnets. "I hate sonnets" said Williams, a favorite of yours; but likely he wouldn't hate these.

MB: Williams also said that, in the sonnet, perfection is basic. When he said that "all sonnets say the same thing," he was likely exaggerating so as to plead for a new poetics—his. The Imagist credo had pointed out that "a new cadence is a new idea." Way before McLuhan. Well, as you said, the Resurrected Dead Man poems merely flirt with the feel of the sonnet. They remember the sonnet. They attend its class reunions. But they have to travel some to get there, and they don't dress right.

DH: How has the idea of "a good poem" changed for you over time?

MB: For one thing, I don't think "good" a useful distinction among more than two people. I have come to see how differently wired people can be, one from the other. Poets honor that wiring, which may make them appear eccentric to others. A poem gains power as it taps into the individual wiring of the poet. I always believed this. I just feel the truth of it more strongly than I did thirty years ago. My students are partly responsible for that. I was watching them even when they thought I was looking elsewhere.

DH: At times I suspect my students have come upon an arrangement of awareness that is literally beyond me. I expect you too have had hints of that.

MB: Awareness rearranged. Yes, I see it in a student now and then. One wonders how much is youth and energy, how much is vision and how much the wind, how much is detached play in the groves of academe. No way to tell for twenty years. Sometimes the "new vision" is attached to a kind of hip gobbledygook so there's no way to tell what the student knows. Still, I confess that I love all my students, even those who talk in tongues and have sex with cars. They have the right.

DH: What poems have surprised you that you have kept in *Nightworks*, poems that have stayed better with you than you had known they would?

MB: I was surprised that so many survived from the first book, *Things We Dreamt We Died For*. Conversely, many of those poems having been reprinted in *A Probable Volume of Dreams* only three years later, it surprised me how few of the new poems survived from the second book—no matter its having received the Lamont Award. I was interested to see how few survived from that book and from some of the later books. But I have had to write a lot and

one of my methods for revision is to throw away whole poems. Williams, who had a busy life and was interested in everything around him, says (I may not quote this perfectly): “Only one answer: to write carelessly so that nothing that is not green will survive.” The last line of the last poem in the “Resurrected” series is, “Green remains.” That’s a deliberate echo of Williams and of what someone said to me when I wondered what the effect of publishing out of New York City would be. She said, “You’ll be green again.” God knows, I started out green and I intended to remain so. Otherwise, writing can turn into earnest labor and a destructive career.

You know, *Nightworks* could turn out to be my final book. I have felt that about a book before—that it might be my last. But that sense of things is not, this time, just emotional, and it’s not the common feeling of emptiness that takes over at the completion of a book. It’s philosophic. Having written two books of Dead Man poems and the “Sounds of the Resurrected Dead Man’s Footsteps,” I can’t go back. They have room for everything I know. They make philosophic sense to me, and the range they cover precludes my writing many other kinds of poems: the poems by which I thought and felt my way forward over the years. I mean simply that I thought my way forward by writing those poems, and then I arrived at the Dead Man poems.

DH: That doesn’t sound like the end to me; it sounds like a beginning.

MB: Well, I’m always looking for the beginning.

DH: “I can’t go back,” you said and I believe you. You’re reminding me of a classic move in American fiction—A. Gordon Pym, Ishmael, Huck, Sylvia and Ruth in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*. The protagonist crosses a divide, goes beyond the beyond and can never return to be among us, can only send a message. In 1839, Pym writes from Illinois, way beyond the pale from Poe’s Baltimore. And so perhaps you from yourself, from your earlier self, the self of your earlier poems. Am I stretching things?

MB: No, not at all. I can’t go back, I can’t make believe . . .

DH: . . . That the ways by which you “thought and felt your way forward” for so long still work for you?

MB: That, and I can’t at my age be allegiant to the aesthetics that a young writer must embrace to learn how to write. You used a phrase, earlier: “our aestheticising of civilization’s failure.”

DH: Perhaps such discoveries, when felt with conviction, extend your footing into a new time, even help define it.

MB: I’d like that to be true. Maybe it is.

DH: The principal coordinates of your range in these new poems seem to me to be Hamlet, the holocaust, and semi-rural Long Island. Astronomers depend on triangulation, I think, and so do you.

MB: Those points sound like *Who We Are* (Hamlet), *What Happened* (the Holocaust) and *Where We Came From* and *What We Remember* (the Island). I'll take it.

DH: "Erasing distinctions." You've said that a couple of times. Clearly it's a powerful idea for you. Between life and death. Between you and your speaker. Between the you that walks outside for the paper and the you that stays up late to entertain a Dead Man. But what happens when you "erase" distinctions? As others have rather famously said, erasure leaves traces and so calls attention precisely to. . .

MB: The Dead Man doesn't erase all distinctions, not those that are analytical, for example, or primary to understanding behavior. Those he erases are pointlessly judgmental, or needlessly portentous, or dine on vanity. Erasing distinctions goes hand in hand with the Zen advice to live as if you were already dead. The idea asserted itself in the very first Dead Man poem: "When there is no good or bad, no useful or useless, no up, no down, no right way, no perfection, then okay it's not necessary that there be direction: up is down." That seemed to me basic.

DH: So it begins with the moral idea of arresting self-assertion.

MB: Is "arresting" a verb? Okay, then, yes. I suppose that's an old idea in my poems: that the self is small. I see it expressed in one way or the other in every book I have written.

After the first one, I looked forward to all sorts of erasures. They were the guts of the vision, if not the philosophy. I especially enjoy hearing those lines whenever I read Dead Man poems aloud. Here, I'll put some into play. They are always down deep serious, but some are also playful on the surface, as in "About the Dead Man and His Masks," where the line reads, "When there is no one face, no two faces, no fragility of disposition, no anticipation, no revelation at midnight, then naturally years pass without anyone guessing the identity of the Dead Man."

In "About the Dead Man and Winter," the line is, "When there is no adversity, no rise and fall, no ascension, no decline, no frost too early, no season too soon, then there's no planet too unstable, no ship in the sky better than another for the journey of a lifetime." Here's one from "About the Dead Man and Medicinal Purposes": "When there is no attachment, no necessity,

no need, no outcome, no consequence of importance, then naturally sick is well, and the end leads to a green beginning.”

DH: What moves me in those lines is the tension between philosophical acceptance and a slight sense of panic.

MB: It’s about letting go. Sometimes it’s about surrendering, sometimes about being free, sometimes about starting over. The line in “About the Dead Man’s Not Sleeping” is an example: “When there is no balance, no even or uneven, no regulation, no permissible range, no parallax, no one sunrise, then naturally the Dead Man from a little salt on his tongue may concoct a new perspective.”

The first poem in *Ardor* has this line: “When there is no birthday, no anniversary, no jubilee, no spree, no holiday, no one mass, meeting or service, then naturally it is up to each person whether to go ahead or turn back.” Here’s the corresponding line in “About the Dead Man and the Interior”: “When there is no more accidental, no inadvertence, no anthropological terrain sufficiently confined, no chaos unlinked to further chaos, no anarchy within anarchy, no thing of discrete substance, then nothing may come between thought and feeling.” As you can see, I am attached to those catalogs of erasure.

DH: Also to collections of lines. Collections that suggests a looser assembly. The way you quote them encourages readers to collect again, from different poems, their favorites. You seem to risk an older-fashioned sense of the integrity of the poem.

MB: I suppose it could be looked at as a different kind of structure. We are a society of jump cuts and counter melodies. A reader can be expected to be able to fill in the blanks and to hear the echos, the parasitics and the harmonics. In a lyric poem, everything happens at once. The last line remembers the first line. The third line may illustrate or complicate the twenty-sixth line. Well, one of the extra benefits of using the sentence as the poetic line is that it lends itself to excerpting. Dead Man poems are often aphoristic. A person could embroider lines from them on pillowcases, if he or she were of such a philosophic nature. I once compiled a computer file of all those lines from *The Book of the Dead Man*—those that begin “When there is no more this or that. . . .” And several years ago I agreed to write a Dead Man poem for a web magazine where there would be a button that a reader could press to reorganize the lines—over and over. I wrote the poem, but the zine didn’t do another issue. I called the poem “The Dead Man’s Roulette,” and it began, “The dead man is out of order.”

DH: All of which is in harmony with “including anything.”

MB: Everything includes its opposite. Every action is met by an opposite and equal reaction. As our son Jason put it, “Either the universe is finite, so nothing is ever lost, or the universe is infinite, so nothing is ever lost.” Language, if sensible, is also insensible.

DH: And if comic, also tragic. Because the catalog, keeps on making distinctions, naming them, and so sustains the undermining doubt.

MB: Have my cake and eat it too.

DH: However, your catalogs fade in these new poems, only a few instances, and shorter, as in “Coos Bay,” part 2 of #6:

And he, who thought he saw a tree through a window, saw
only his mind.

Even then, he was lucky beyond belief, sane past reason.

When there is no sworn millennium, no first year, no tickle of
time, no end in sight, then he is keen to witness the
otherness at hand.

MB: I like trying to erase time. I’m not sure I believe in time. I believe in entropy. I believe in the place. The psychologists call it “flow” when you find yourself so engaged in an activity that you lose track of time. That’s the way it is late at night when I write. It’s midnight, then it’s one a.m., then it’s five a.m. Where did the time go? Sometimes I think I write to escape time. To escape time, to stop my brain, to get past words, and to study the dark without turning on a light.

DH: It’s as if the Resurrected Dead Man’s stance is an aspiration. A leaning forward to something new.

MB: Well, I wish I knew. But I never know until it hits me. Randall Jarrell said that poets walk around in storms hoping to be hit by lightning. I may have to get out in the rain again.

DH: I think he got that, where did I read it once? Aspiring poets of the ancient Irish, their MFA candidates, slept out under a lone oak on a hill during a night of thunderstorms. They either woke up translated to a better place or as poets.

MB: It’s a risk, that’s for sure. But, you know, we’re talking between books, a time when I usually find myself without aesthetic bearings. I could wake up tomorrow with a new song in my head or a new kaleidoscope in my eye. And there’s something else. I have been told that the Dead Man poems

force a reader to rethink what a poem is. At one time I thought about what would happen if I deleted the section titles from each of the Dead Man poems and presented each of them as two stanzas rather than two sections. Certainly, they would look more conventional that way. But the point was made to me, and it seemed important, that the way they are now confronts the question of what poetry is, and indeed it was my intention to do so. So there's the chance that I'll go right on awhile with "Sounds of the Resurrected Dead Man's Footsteps," which look like Dead Man poems but are different in point of view and content.

DH: It's less integrative the way you have it. The old problem of One and Two. One can be a complex sentence, two clauses, but one subordinated to the other, making the whole one thing after all. The compound sentence sustains the independence of Two. The clauses could separate grammatically as apple and orange. Your poems offer that strange compound challenge, with its own "character of emotion." How rarely do you see a painting offering two images, on equal footing, with the question left open, how much are we to draw these together?

MB: One of the fundamentals of quantum physics is that a particle inside an atom can be momentarily in two places at the same time. The tracks of quantum physics are probably my tracks, though I didn't come to that understanding by reading science. I'm just that way. We're all just that way. so I have referred in poems to the notion of "turning on a light to study the dark" (the physicist would say that the presence of the observer changes what is observed). It's why I tend to think "entropy" rather than "time" (the physicist again: one can't know the location and speed of a particle at the same time).

DH: And so your poems invite the question: is this pairing a poem? Our readers can look at the poems on the first two pages of this issue. In part 2 of the second poem, for example, (#62), is "using up tissues" a reference to something planted, dispersed, issued in part 1 that we haven't recognized yet, or is it a new start held in some kind of coordination. I'm not saying we have to decide. But there is something continuously unsettling about that disposition on the page. I mean that as a compliment and as one way of your keeping the question alive.

MB: It's true: no tissues in part 1. Teeth, but no tissues. In the case of this particular poem, the second part replies to the first. In part 1, Death is seen as an archer. He can shoot down anyone. Part 2 comes about in relation to that knowledge. It says, in its way, on the one hand that one lives as one can. If

the muffler falls off, tie it up with a shoelace. Near the end, we get a little autobiography, with implications. Maybe it's because the speaker once "split his head open" that he thinks in two directions at once. Maybe that's why he has to proceed sideways. Well, poetry often goes sideways. I suppose one could say that peripheral vision increases its range. Yes, I'd say that. Perhaps the Dead Man poems register more immediately with the kind of reader who has, in some sense, split his or her head open. And who has learned how to arrive by going sideways. Blame it on individual wiring. I love those traits.

DH: I'm not saying that we need be certain. That unsettled quality is a challenge. Have you ever used a shoelace to tie your muffler up? Perhaps that too is a touch of autobiography. Readers have an invitation to find the relation they need. Often I wish my wiring were more sideways than it appears to be. Perhaps in part that's because, having no experience as anything other than a majority citizen of this country, I've had less obvious need, and certainly less prompting to look sideways. So let me ask, if I may, and to shift our focus radically, what has it been like to be a Jew in Iowa City?

MB: For me, easy. But I'm a college teacher who works among people who are generally tolerant. Artists, writers, professors—many are themselves Jewish, or otherwise out of the mainstream. It should be obvious that outsiders become artists in disproportionate numbers. And I'm ecumenical. As a kid, I attended Catholic mass with friends, sang once in a Methodist choir, played trumpet duets in fundamentalist churches in upstate New York. I have been to Quaker Meeting, and last summer I delivered a sermon—I would like to say, "honest to God"—in a Unitarian Church in Seattle. Nonetheless, I'm a Jew who attended Hebrew School for four years after the regular school day ended, who was bar mitzvahed. Like any Jewish person, I feel the hazards of a people who have been scapegoated and dispersed. I share the grounded conscience, the bias toward a practical philosophy, and the equating of study with prayer that is often part of the Jewish sensibility. I haven't personally experienced any serious overt anti-Semitism in Iowa City, though I am sure it occurs here just as it occurs everywhere.

DH: I believe you were the youngest in your home. At the dinner table, were you much listened to or much more aware of listening?

MB: Yes, I was the youngest. I have a sister, Ruby, who is four years older. I don't remember thinking I wasn't being listened to. I can't remember thinking about it at all. Maybe we were innocent: we weren't on the lookout for slights. I was probably a poor listener as a kid. Who wasn't? We spoke mostly

of practical matters. And I was too much in motion to converse for long, busy with music, sports, amateur radio, journalism, girls, you name it.

DH: Whose voice from your family is now most in your ear?

MB: My father's. Not that he talked a lot or that I remember much. A few words attached to attitudes is what I remember. I never worked to remember things like that. I still don't. And my ears are filled with music, rather than words, to the extent that voices don't generally get in unless they are singing.

DH: How literally do you mean that? Singing at home, together?

MB: No. It's just that the tone of voice with which I am addressed has a lot to do with whether or not I listen and with what sort of attitude. Although I do hail from a time when children were asked to stand beside the piano and sing songs like "Golden Earrings" or "Lavender Blue (Dilly Dilly)"—whatever was popular. About four times a year, I pull out my old Bach cornet, sight-read a few tunes from fake books I bought in the fifties, and end with "If I Loved You," Dorothy's favorite.

DH: Then voices from your childhood and youth, if not from your family.

MB: I remember little things that people said. Remarks that hit the spot for me but which would be of little interest to someone else. Remarks that signaled an attitude or a philosophy.

DH: Has your sense of your Jewishness, as a factor in and of your poems, changed much or stayed about the same since you came to Iowa City, or since you began writing poems for that matter?

MB: I suspect many people, as they age, become more philosophic. In that way, one expresses again one's background, one's family, one's philosophic leanings. And in that way, perhaps I now seem "more Jewish." The phrase "Jewish Zen" might be apt, but I don't like to talk about Zen. Zen is not talk. Judaism is talk about action. Zen, when it must speak, is talk about inaction—the stillness at the center of a spinning wheel. They accompany one another quite nicely, I think.

DH: Number 16 in this series (p.1), focuses on your childhood. Does it feel particularly Jewish to you or would you call it more ecumenical and rural Long Island in spirit? Perhaps it hints, in the first few lines, of the former, moves on to the latter, and ends somewhere else entirely.

MB: Rural Long Island is the religion, and south-shore-eastern-Long-Island is the sect. The first three lines carry the feeling a young man might have about having been born at all—the mystery of it, the strangeness, the sense of unseen connections. When I look at this poem, I see that I am still at the same

old stand. The Meaning-Of-Life Stand. The Who-Was-I-And-Who-Am-I-
Stand. I'm still a peddler of ideas, rummaging in my cart to see what I have.
The Human-Condition-Stand. The What-Is-Language-Stand. The Ecumeni-
cal-Church-Of-Wonder-Stand.

DH: The first line seems to me typical of your stance, "over the shoulder,"
casualness, a hesitation about squaring up. And so a search for footing, for the
face to present to the faces that you meet. But "there were heroes" and so a
model. I'm reminded of "These Green-Going-to-Yellow." You're still look-
ing belt high, not as if you were a god. Part 2 has gained more assertive
ground. The quarry IS a Grand Canyon. You WILL understand.

MB: I stick a toe in the water, and then a foot, before I venture in, wanting
not to divert the currents that are crossing and recrossing the material.

DH: Comment please on those last three lines.

I learned that language can think for itself.

I needed to stop myself from thinking everything at once.

Our ocean was the ocean, but our England was just tea.

MB: Those are true statements. The first one, that's a defining moment.
The speaker has learned that you can get someplace with the language but it's
the language that determines where. The second sentence: that's the curse of
seeing both sides, of hearing what wasn't said. I suppose a psychiatrist might
say it was obsessive-compulsive, and perhaps it is. And the third sentence is
about proportion and location. I grew up on the Atlantic, but no ocean could
connect me to England. Our knowledge of anything distant was limited to
whatever we could come up with. The more knowledge we obtained, the
more we were aware of our ignorance.

DH: What do you think your generation has added to poetry?

MB: My generation writes in the shadow of the powerful generation of the
twenties. They were closer to the beginnings of modernism. Their innova-
tions are obvious on the page. They were able to launch an extraordinary
number of strikingly individual styles at a time when nearly everyone felt that
the individual was paramount, not just in art but in every aspect of life. They
were shaped by World War II, whereas we were shaped by Korea and Viet
Nam. They were shaped by radio, when long distance calls usually meant
trouble. We were shaped by television, and long distance calling became
routine. The world grew smaller around us, and society realized that truly no
man or woman is an island. I don't know what to say about what we added.

I wouldn't want to claim too much. It's up to readers to decide. I'm not sure poets "add." Still, a writer's individual expression of his or her times and circumstances may seem like an addition to the art. Let's say that we added our voices, and embodied our times, as Keats did in his time and Marianne Moore in hers. I sometimes think that my generation of American poets may be the last of the personal voices. I don't mean "personal styles." I mean personal voices that emerge from diction, syntax, the selection and handling of details—less from the more flamboyant aspects of style and more from the little maneuvers that express character. Not that my generation of poets doesn't include some with unique poetic styles. Yes, we have a few, but not as many as the generation in front of us.

DH: One of those in the generation before us that I know you value especially is Richard Wilbur, which, perhaps, not everyone would guess.

MB: His poems will last, I think, as long as poems last. Wilbur is as highly respected today as he ever was, but he's not "hot," and to shallow readers of poetry he may now seem eclipsed, old-fashioned and tame.

DH: Tell me more.

MB: It's simple. Wilbur writes perfect poems. They define their terms without postmodern wriggling, and invariably those terms are the terms of an art central to the precise expression of feeling. Then they completely fill the space described by those terms. They use up everything. His poems are as well designed and interconnected as that spider's web I mentioned earlier. Notwithstanding his learning and good manners, they come out of the center of his emotional life, rather than from the edges, and they express key ideas about serious subjects. Because he is not avant-garde, he receives less press. But he is something more important than avant-garde. He is contemporary.

DH: There you go again with "using everything up."

MB: Yes, there's a difference between just mentioning something in a poem and using it. Wilbur has been pushed to the side by the same forces that have so badly distorted American poetry. An anthology that omits William Carlos Williams, for example (and this is an actual example) is simply not an anthology of American poetry. Modern American poetry begins with Whitman and Williams. Its French arm is Stevens and its British arm, through the hymnal, is Dickinson. We are in a prolonged adolescence right now in which some of our poetry and most of our poetry criticism depends for its clarity and importance on theories or the elaboration of "themes." Some critics seem to view poetry as an excuse for elaborate conversation. Discussing "themes" in

poetry or theorizing about the origins and slippages of language allows the highly educated an illusion of a useful intelligence.

DH: What changes have come on the poetic scene, in your time, that give you the most confidence about the future?

MB: The emotional life of a people finds expression in the arts, on all levels. My confidence, in this regard, is limited to seeing how “human” human beings remain. We aren’t yet the machines that we may become if and when the experts unravel the remaining mysteries of the body. I feel “confident” in the future, if “confident” is the word, to the extent that youth remains innocent and the past is remembered.

DH: What from your time in poetry do you most regret?

MB: Occasionally, when I confront my so-so education, I wish I had been a better student. Occasionally, when I see students being misled, I wish I had the stomach for argument, but I don’t. Occasionally, I wish I had taken on certain writing projects, but what would I have given up? Time with Dorothy, Nathan or Jason? No thanks. Occasionally, I wish I had been a more selfish teacher.

DH: Well from my long association with students from your program, I have known you as a teacher who has inspired many and won great trust. Now as Iowa’s first Poet Laureate, you are not only honored but called on to continue teaching, more broadly. What would you like young people to learn about poetry? Where should they begin?

MB: Poetry attracts us first by its sound, then by its sense. Later we realize that one can’t separate the two, which is when it gets really interesting. Sound includes talk, and sense includes philosophy. I’d like young people, and others, too, to see poetry for what it is and to welcome its eccentricities and foibles as a method for finding the right words. I’d like them to realize the ways in which poetry says Yes. They should begin by reading and writing. Reading leads to writing. I don’t necessarily want them to learn “about” poetry, but to absorb poems. Just as one absorbs songs without analyzing them. When a poem is supported by lots of talk, it often means the poem is half-baked. When a poet supports his or her poem with lots of talk, it often means the poet is half-baked.

DH: What has poetry added to your life that is of the most value to you? Had it not been poetry, what might have come closest to filling its gap?

MB: The arts had a deep effect on me. I was one of those people who couldn’t keep from thinking. Poetry gave me a way to express everything at

once. That is, it gave me a method by which to say more than words can say. The arts kept me sane. Or maybe they let me pass. Without the arts, I would have carried rope burns all of my life.

What other art might have served? It could have been music. It could have been photography. I believe that I would have made something personal out of whatever hand I was dealt. But the arts gave me permission to be more fully myself and to look within myself for material, and then they gave me texts that revealed themselves to me slowly. And eventually some of these texts had been written by me. How wonderful for a boy from Center Moriches. How lucky for anyone. It's tempting to fib about how and why one writes. Many poets fancy up their writing talk because they fear that, if the reader knows the truth, he or she won't respect them in the morning. But my example is simple, and I have no reason to pretend otherwise. Because I was unable and unwilling to do without the arts, I have had enormous amounts of dumb luck. At the level that interests me most, the arts are all about surrender. And the arts are full of dumb luck.

DH: Which reminds me of something else Montaigne said. I paraphrase, "All things are made by Nature, by Chance, or by Art. Of the three, Art is the least interesting." Or perhaps art becomes interesting for surrendering a little to luck and chance.

MB: The more surrender, the better. To nature, to luck, and to chance. Art creates the chances. Nature, inside and outside us, is the groundwork. But you have to learn the cockpit before you can fly by the seat of your pants.